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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#) [SCUL](#)
SUBJECT: ALL ON THE SAME PAGE: INFORMATION MINISTER COMMITS
TO COOPERATION WITH THE USG

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JAMES F. MORIARTY. Reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) The Information and Culture Minister, Abul Kalam Azad, spoke at length about the importance of press freedom and avenues for cooperation between the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) and the USG, including in spreading anti-extremist messages in a June 2 discussion with the Ambassador. The Minister thanked the U.S. for its help in implementing development and democratization initiatives in the country and re-iterated his government's commitment to free speech and a free press. Azad, a close friend of the Embassy and a former participant in the USG's International Visitor Program, also extended his support to several USG initiatives in Bangladesh.

Freedom of the press

¶2. (C) The Minister affirmed that freedom of expression and freedom of press were guaranteed under the current government. He pointed out that this was a basic prerequisite for a democratically elected government, noting that "if we have democracy, transparency and freedom of the press, the country will progress." He noted as a caveat however, namely that journalistic ethics should be upheld, especially during national crises, like the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) mutiny in February. The Ambassador said he appreciated the GOB's support for the new investigative reporting center set up as part of a USG-funded anti-corruption initiative. Azad replied the GOB considered it a very critical undertaking as information flows in a democracy should be a two way street: with the government informing the public and citizens providing the government with feedback.

No reason to limit foreign newsprint

¶3. (C) In response to the Ambassador's query about a proposed requirement that Bangladesh's newspapers use a minimum of 50% domestic newsprint and plans to impose a 100% duty on imported newsprint, the Minister agreed this was a bad move. The Ambassador and the Minister agreed this would likely increase costs for newspapers and weaken the independence of the media, given the limited supply of newsprint from the domestic market. The Minister said vested interests were pushing such a move against the interests of the country as a whole. Azad added that he had expressed opposition to the proposal in discussions with the Finance Minister.

Green light to anti-violence programs and to Sesame Street

¶4. (C) The Minister announced that the GOB had formally

approved the Embassy,s anti-violence campaign in Bangladesh.

(Note: The program will disseminate simple anti-violence messages through a variety of media, including local theater, books, television programs and commercials. End note.) Azad added that the GOB would lend any support it could through its national television station, Bangladesh TV (BTV). Separately, he registered the importance of finding ways to keep the Bengali version of the popular children,s program, Sesame Street (known locally as Sisimpur) on the air, committing BTV to help. The program, Sisimpur, taught children discipline, Azad said, and without education "no country can progress." (Note: USG funding for Sisimpur is set to end in 2011. We are exploring ways to fund the program on a longer term basis. End note.)

Comment

15. (C) Azad is a close friend of the United States and a straight shooter about the challenges Bangladesh faces both at home and abroad. We believe we can count on him to support USG efforts. He is a rare breed of politician: honest, down to earth and committed to serving the national interest rather than purely a partisan agenda. Public Affairs concurs. He can be an ally in numerous USG public diplomacy initiatives.

MORIARTY